

Lights and Shadows

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lights & smoppeys

Her mouth hung open like gaping wounds, screaming silent pleas. The curse of time had hurt her so that she was unable to find a place for it... "I want you to remember how important this was to me," he said and gently handed it to Edmund... I would have felt comfortable in their sameness and their consistency to the cycle of life. I wouldn't have moved my eyes away from the constant gaze of his. I would have touched... It touches deeper than any full moon, and sounds like murder... dreaming quite heavily now... it's too much to bear But you go on livin' without worry or care. Back home... So, painting the picture of her shortcomings... a rush of blood, standing up and i'm down on the pavement, picking... wondering how you grew those wings. Where was I when you left?... down there in the dark we played our roles perfectly... the sky glows pale gold and coral pigments Raphael used to paint his heavenly cherubs... beautiful in its shape, rose like our apprehension and cast a shadow over the eyes watching... One and two, with the wind and the dead poets cutting sleek lines through reality, she allowed me... this is my blanket. The Earth, my bed. I will lie here... in my life the regrets are very few save for the savory... can't see my window shinin' on but nobody's home. Everybody wants... He must have written once on a night like

American Monsters

Zach McMasters

I'm the crème de la crème
of American monsters.
Here I am (down the street).

Take a look inside –
my American house.
Materials speak,
my toys come to life.

American books,
burgers and bibles.
Un-imagination.

Sleep comes easy,
sleep is free.
American dreams
on television.

Exercise? My rights.
I have a few
more questions:

What? How come?
Is that all?
Hello?

Off the hook,
off the chain.

I just bought
another alibi.

July 16, 1945

K.D. Bridges

*I*t was the brightest bright.

The tremendous burst
of light through the
black welder's glass
as though the sun itself
had been destroyed.

The plume,
like an upside-down
ink drop in a bowl
of milk, beautiful
in its shape, rose
like our apprehension
and cast a shadow
over the eyes watching.

A wave of heat
lashed at our faces,
the force of it
a fury and anger
at its creators.

The sound
followed behind like

a thousand storm clouds
or the voice of God,
calling out. That of an
angry father admonishing
a child who
has done wrong.

Dusty July

Katie Hines

*T*hrow a needle at that cloud,
But it still won't bust.
It's darker than a blackberry,
Teasing us.

Mother licks her fingers
To sharpen the thread.
Her voice is dry. It's loud, but
It can't conceal her dread.

She tries to be humorous
When the fields are lookin' bleak..
"All's well that's rained on!"
It's her saying of the week.

Everything you would become

Perri Hubbard

At first, Florence was my great escape. It was the beginning of my future. No more high school, no more seemingly too-small town, no more familiarity. I was in Florence because of college, nothing more, nothing less. I didn't know a soul and home was hundreds of miles away. I liked that.

I liked that I didn't know anyone. I could be anyone I wanted. Somehow I ended up being myself. I was myself...by myself. My roommate was merely that – someone I shared a room with. I'd always romanticized the idea of moving away to college and making tons of friends immediately. The kind of friends I'd have for life. It was not easy. Most people I encountered on campus seemed as cold and as stiff as the bricks that formed the surrounding buildings.

I met my first friend by accident, but I suppose that is how friendships occur once you enter this so-called adulthood. No longer are you thrust in a sandbox or a classroom with people predestined to befriend you. I was in the mezzanine of the dingy old dorm that I called my new home. I had been in Florence a week and finally decided to wash a load of laundry. The laundry room in the mez was small and the machines accepted quarters. Well, I suppose some people's quarters were accepted. Not mine. I could not figure out how to work the damned things. Finally, I asked a girl for help. She seemed to have no trouble load-

ing her running washer with clothes and detergent. I asked her for help because I assumed she was an upperclassman, wise, all-knowing...at least when it came to dorm washing machines.

The girl was a freshman like me, but unlike me, she had figured out the washing machines a few days before. After successfully beginning my wash cycle, we talked for hours. In one move I had defeated my laundry and friend dilemmas. Like those machines, our friendship seemed old...yet unfamiliar. It didn't always work, it tried my patience, and soon enough, the cycle ended.

My knowledge of Florence began to expand, as well as my social circle. I learned street names, I made new friends. We'd pile in someone's car and drive around, or pile as many chairs as we could around one table in the student union building. We couldn't get enough of each other. I was a little less myself, and a little more like them. I snuck into their dorms or stayed past curfew. We took the same classes in the same brick buildings. Some of us got tattoos. Some of us hooked up. Some of us got in fights. Some of us stopped speaking for no good reason. Some of us got mixed up in the cycle and our friendships were never quite the same. Florence seemed more like home.

After a year, I realized what Florence truly was - a tar pit. Once it got a hold of someone, it didn't let them go easily. It seemed to me that people who were from Florence (locals, townies, whatever you want to call them) didn't seem to leave. Or if they did leave, they came back. I suppose this can be said for lots of

places...but I found it to be very prevalent in Florence. At first I was attracted to people like me. People from out of town, new freshmen, kids who saw the town the way I saw it – a temporary home. A tiny spot on the map of our huge futures. Then I started to meet locals. Some still lived at home with their parents. Others had merely moved a few miles across the river into a new city. I was oddly drawn to these people... almost by accident. I didn't know where they were from when I first met them, of course, but it seemed more and more of my friends and acquaintances were rooted nearby.

These people already knew each other, they had circles and cliques formed. I intruded with other out-of-towners – we never quite fit in. But I liked that. I didn't know who so-and-so took to prom, and I didn't care. None of them knew what I looked like in 8th grade, no one was familiar with my hometown. It was like I had little secrets, I had a past, and so did all my friends.

The past didn't matter here. It was the present that mattered, but looking back, I thought only the future mattered. My mind romanticized the friendships I would make and the places I would travel to by the time I was this age. Instead, I am here, in Florence, stuck in a little tar pit...at least until graduation, when I will reach the end of the cycle, cleanse myself of this place, and leave. I don't mind it. I know I can move on, and once again romanticize my future. The back roads through neighborhoods will be forgotten, good friends will lose touch, and I will look back and make Florence something beautiful.

Apartment E Minor

Zach McMasters

*T*he dirty water as I
walk along the curb, splashing
my ankle with cold satisfaction, reminds me
of a girl I used to know.

I think, I linger,
I light a cigarette for her.

Inhale, exhale –
neutral and mechanical.

I decide that nothing is comparable to
this sudden lethargic winter spreading
throughout my veins.

One and two, with the
wind and the rain, the fervent
static and the dead poets cutting
sleek lines through reality,
she allowed me to
brush the hair away from

her face as she bled
salty, unforgiving tears.

Yes, I do remember.

I take a drag and wish her well.

Laundromat

Zach McMasters

Best Poem Award Winner

Her eyes stared out
from sunken trenches,
begging for reprieve.
The plague of age
had maimed her so that
she was unable
to walk away from it.

Her mouth hung open
like a gaping wound,
screaming silent pleas.
The curse of time
had hurt her so that
she was unable
to find a place for it.

The woman on the
motorized scooter
holding money
between her knees

steered herself
toward the laundromat
and made me think of

war.

Circus Society

Brett Leslie

Angry beavers crawl down
escalators. Frogs grow huge in-
appropriate johnsons. Kangaroos leap
miraculously. Norwegian octopuses
produce quality republicans.
Shaman teach us vital wisdom
Xenophobes yelp zealously.

Hoes and Heroin

Brett Leslie

*I*t was late afternoon, around 2:00 and Eugene was still asleep. The room he slept in was filthy. The secluded window had an old blue sheet covering it and the place reeked of mildew and cigarette smoke. The lack of adequate lighting created a dungeon like atmosphere. The walls were barren except for the cracking wallpaper and the infamous melting clocks painting by Salvador Dali. The carpet had turned a dingy tan-brown color from all the empty beer cans and food scraps lying around. Three of his six-toed cats ran across the room and leapt on his bed.

Yawning, he gradually awoke from his slumber on the lone frameless and sheet less mattress tucked in the corner of the room. He sat up and slid to the edge of the bed, accidentally knocking off the framed photograph of his ex-wife. Leaning over, he grabbed the dope and syringe from under the bed and snatched the rusty old spoon. Pushing his long dark brown hair away from eyes he sprinkled the powder on it; cooking it down until it was thick liquid. He then removed his belt, pulling it tighter and tighter around his left arm. He sucked the liquid into the syringe, thumped the cylinder, and tapped his vein. Poking the needle in his arm he pushed the plunger down and fell back onto the bed-- eyes dilated with needle nestled in arm. In state of euphoria he cried

out words to his ex-wife, “Baby I’ll be with you soon, I’ll never forget ya, I swear.”

Minutes later he regained some composure and took out the guitar he played religiously every day. He meticulously checked every string making sure it was in pristine tuning. Flipping through his notebook of songs, He decided that emulating some jazzy/blues chords into his new songs would be a great idea. While practicing a new song he wrote his roommate barged in the room. Adrien noticed the drug paraphernalia lying on the floor and shouted. “You fucking cheapskate. Get your own shit, man! This is the last time you shoot up my stuff without pitching in.”

High and preoccupied with his guitar Eugene paid little mind to Adrien’s outburst.

“Dude,” Eugene uttered, “I just re-upped last night so quit yer bitching and take a bump.”

Adrien noticed the bag was larger, “Sorry man. I thought you’d used it all up.”

He sat next to Eugene and prepped up for his turn. As he cut the powder into a pencil thick line he thought for a moment and exclaimed, “Wait a minute, where’d you get the money for it? We’ve got to somehow pay next month’s rent or else get evicted.”

“No worries man, I slept with that slutty girl from the gig the other night.”

“Candy? “

Laughing Eugene replied, “Yeah.”

What does she got ta do with the money you spent?”

“Well, if you’d let me finish dude, I was going to tell

you she'd a batch last night. While she was sleeping I took us a cut. She was folded hard last night; no way she'll remember."

Eugene went back to plucking on the guitar. Adrien meanwhile snorted his line and melted back onto the bed.

Eugene woke up on Tuesday and found his stash dwindled down to nothing. So instead he reached for the pot. Carefully picking out all the seeds and stems, he rolled an exceptionally well crafted joint. The smell reminded him of the first time he met Candy. It was about two months ago backstage at Joe's Bar before one of his shows. She was dressed extremely slutty that night with red high heels, fishnet stockings, and a black leather one piece outfit. She confronted him first asking him to join her for a joint. They went to the bathroom, smoked, and consummated with dirty bar bathroom sex.

"Damn, I gotta go back to that dirty bitch's house." Eugene put the joint out in an old Papst Blue Ribbon can on the floor and left for Candy's apartment. The library was on the way, so he decided to stop and check out a book he wanted entitled *In the Penal Colony* by Franz Kafka. He recently purchased Frank Zappa's, "Lumpy Gravy", and noticed reading the lyrics, a short instructional passage linking the book's importance to the album. If he wasn't getting high or playing his guitar he was reading. He would go to the library and spend hours reading poetry and stories. On several occasions the library would close and the security guard would have to ask him to leave. He arrived at Candy's apartment, rang the doorbell, and

knocked twice to no avail. Deciding to wait in the hallway until she returned, he slumped down next to the weathered door and lit a cigarette. Smoke filled the hallway as he puffed cigarette after cigarette. Moments later disturbing images raced through his mind, a daydream of dead baby fetuses. Anger filled his heart.

“God, you’re a sick man you know that? You’re probably a fucking sick and twisted little boy with a magnifying glass. How about you quit hiding and show yourself, huh. Speak to me or leave me be, quit toying with my life you bastard puppet master.”

One of his favorite poems was *The Chimney Sweeper*, and calming himself down he started reciting the first verse.

“When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry ‘Weep! weep! weep! weep!’
So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep.”

High school is where he first learned of Mr. Blake and now facilitated thoughts of his teenage years crept in his head. He recalled his time in high school, which was spent mostly in the writing center and art department. Reminiscing on how he strayed away from the normal educational curriculum, seeking out instead writers and artist that intrigued him.

About an hour passed and Candy finally returned.

“Eugene, I’m surprised to see you so soon.” She had a gleaming smile on her face as she put the keys in the doorknob and unlocked the door. “Come on in, I

was disappointed to find you gone Sunday morning, I was hoping I'd see you again."

Eugene gently scratch his scraggly beard and gazed about the room,

"Well I'm out of smack and my roommate is low on cash, so I thought I'd come over and see if you'd front me a couple of G's. I'll hit you back with the cash on Friday after the show."

Candy knew all along why he had came to her but didn't want him to know she knew. "Why should I front it to you, what's in it for me?"

Not at all surprised by her request Eugene replied, "Look, girl you'll never understand the stress and pain I've been through. I ain't gonna lie there's nothing really in it for you."

Candy looked at him confused, "How's your life more stressful or painful than anybody else's? Huh? You sit around in your apartment all day and do nothing. You know what, to be honest I'm actually quite dry right now, but my bedroom could serve as a stress reliever. What'd ya say?"

She began to remove her shirt but Eugene stopped her.

"No that's not what I came here for, I came for the smack. You don't understand what it's like to be me. I'm having an extremely difficult time dealing with some shit right now."

She stopped unbuttoning her shirt, "Alright, alright, jeez calm down there haus. Now, just tell me what's on your mind."

Looking down at the floor Eugene reluctantly

confided in her, “Well last year my wife had a miscarriage and lost her life.”

Candy’s eyes were reminiscent of a deer in the head lights, “I’m so sorry that happened to you, tell you what, have sex with me again and I’ll give you what’s left of my stash. Sound good?”

Eugene stood up from the chair he was sitting in and shouted, “No you nymph whore, I’m tired of having of my recent sex escapades with women, just front me some fucking heroin.”

She unbuttoned her shirt and exposed her breasts, “Come on Eugene you know you want it.”

Slowly grasping both breasts, she squeezed and flopped them together and about, “Heroin lies at the end of this rainbow, baby.”

“Fuck, why is everything about sex with you?” Fighting off his sexual urges, he clutched Candy by both arms and spat in her face. He stormed out the apartment emptied handed.

It was midnight and he was walking through the alley when he spotted a strung out pregnant woman smoking a Virginia Slim 120, drooped against the brick wall. His mind played back women in his life. Unable to remember the night he spent with the hippy, who lived on 9th and Hennepin, the beautiful brunette he met after a show, or the sixteen year old girl who lied about her age. What he did remember; however, was the pain his wife went through while clutching his hand, and the lifeless expression on her face in the moments after she passed. Even remembering the flat they picked out on the east side of town, and the room in which, Kayla, their daughter

would have slept in. He tried not to remember those things.

When he returned home Adrien was passed out on the kitchen floor.

“Really, again? How many times are you gonna O.D. dude, fuck!” Reaching in the cabinet drawer he grabbed an adrenaline shot and ran over to Adrien. He knelt down beside him and checked his pulse. It was faint. He ripped Adrien’s shirt off and found the center of his heart. Immediately after the needle pierced the breastplate Adrien shot up and gasped for air. “Jesus Christ man you scared the shit out of me”, Standing up Eugene looked at the mirror on the counter top which they always used to cut their lines out onto. It was littered with white speckles. How much did he do at once he thought? Staring at the substance, he contemplated what Adrien told him earlier in the week and the situation at hand. His nose inched closer and closer, then the distinguished smell suddenly struck him. It sent his brain receptors into overdrive. Teasing Eugene, his body drifted into a false sense of euphoria and thus he took the razor blade and scrapped together a pinkie sized line and snorted it all in one breath.

Pastor Dan

Brett Leslie

Sitting all alone a decrepit dirty homeless man
collects coins and takes up city land.
His fingernails covered in black,
from the garbage that serves as a snack.
His bottom teeth missing.
His hair gray, balding and receding,
while his breath smells like tuna salad
from a whore who sang sweet ballads.
Is he a waste of talent or a run of bad luck?
Some even say he's a world-class schmuck.

The lack of alcohol for several hours begins to take
affect.
Sweating profusely his hands shake,
He rubs his head which starts to ache.
His life--- a continuous train wreck.

He watches people walking by:
dropping coins or turning a blind eye----
Blood as cold as ice. The leather face man
now stands on the street corner with a beer can,
and a wooden sign prophesying the return of Christ.

Man at War

Tricia Stevenson

Another boy concedes democratically.
It is his turn to step up and throw
down his life on their line. So that
we, actually, can feel better about our
Starbucks Frappe Latte. He'll squat and
cough and duck-walk down the hall
with one doctor holding onto each
ball for the opportunity to fight with
the best, while at the same time squelching
all the rest of the developing nations in the world.
He: neatly oppressed, preparing
quintessential rage; strong throughout units,
varying within.
Taught how to hate his enemy he has become
Property of propaganda; purveyor of political
Ideals pushed upon automatons of war.

I walk the charred-grey Earth
that is now testament to
the folly of man. Ash sweeping
like Russian ballerinas
across the world entire.
Skies darkened with that thick,
smokey, blanket. Sewn by
us, harnessing the needle
of ingenuity; lovingly threaded
with curiosity. Tonight, this is
my blanket. The Earth,
my bed. I will lie here and think
not of my woe upon this waste,
but of a garden I had.

I Am 22 Years Old

Elliott Sullivan III

I am 22 years old today.
I lie in a tub of warm water.

It is such a strange feeling,
Yet so distinct.
As I lower myself in,
Slowly but surely,
The water consumes my body.

It is such a strange feeling,
Yet so distinct.
The last time I submerged,
So many moons ago,
My body was small
And so were my troubles.

Back then it was different.
There were bubbles,
And my mother scrubbed me clean.

My mother saw me naked.

If my mother walked in right now,
I'd scream.
But now, I try to figure out who—
Who I wouldn't scream for.

Downstairs, they're almost gone.
People dispersing.

Friends leaving the party.
My parents are clearing the tables.

I wonder if they notice
I'm no longer there.
I wonder if they know—
Know me.
Know my worries.

I am 22 years old today.
I am a college student.
I lie in a tub of warm water.

It seems so odd
To come home again.
To get away from it all.
To be away from her.

She's so beautiful.
She's got her head on her shoulders.
Everything points in the right direction.

We're supposed to get together.
We're supposed to study.
There's no computer here.
I could email her,
But I haven't.

We're supposed to connect.
We're supposed to talk.
I know her number.
I could call,
But I haven't.

I look down,
Seeing nothing but bare flesh—
Pockets of water filling the dips of my skin.

If my mother walked in right now,
I'd scream.
But now, I try to figure out who—
Who I wouldn't scream for.

She's so beautiful.
She's got her head on her shoulders.
I wonder if I'd scream for her.

I wonder if she noticed
I'm no longer there.
I wonder if she knows—
Knows me.
Knows my worries.

I wonder if she knows,
Knows my virginities.
I wonder if she cares,
Cares that I'm rusty.
Wrinkled around the edges
From years of inexperience.

I wonder if she'll know,
Know my mind.
I wonder if she'll care,
Care for my rusty kisses.
They're wrinkled around the edges
From years of inexperience.

I am 22 years old today.
I am so young yet so old.
I lie in a tub of warm water.

It seemed so easy to slip into.
So second-place to 21.
But for me,
Things are never what they seem.

It is such a strange feeling,
Yet so distinct.
The last time I submerged,
My body was small
And so were my troubles.

Now, I have to cross my legs
To even fit inside.
But it doesn't matter.
I feel the warmth,
Slowly but surely,
Consuming my body.

I am 22 years old today.
I lie in a tub of warm water.

I sit up,
Put my head between my legs,
And scream into the water.
I scream loud enough
That I'll never have to again.

I scream into the water.
That way, no one will hear me.

That way, she'll never hear me—
She'll never hear my screams.

What It Means to Remember

Perri Hubbard

Best Fiction Award Winner

Edmund sat at the edge of the old twin-sized bed in his room at his parents' house. He stared down at the streams of sunlight creeping through his blinds and onto the floor. He remained in this dazed state for a few minutes as he allowed his body to 'wake up', until he automatically reached for the hidden pack of Camel cigarettes that were squished beneath his mattress. He placed one between his lips as he stood up, adjusted himself, and walked over to the window. Up went the blinds and sunlight flooded the room, waking Lord Byron who was curled up on the floor. The old Boxer perked his triangular ears as Edmund pried open the window and stuck his head outside, letting the wind ruffle his brown hair. Then he realized he didn't have a lighter.

He turned around and searched the messy room. Lord Byron was on top of yesterday's jeans and Edmund had to squat down and coax the boxer off of them. He reached into the front pocket hoping to retrieve a cheap Bic lighter, but only found a wrinkled dollar bill. He kicked clothes around on the floor hoping to find it. He let his eyes scan his room, and then he saw it - not the Bic lighter, but the old silver lighter his grandfather had given him a few years before. It sat on his dresser, where it always had. He grabbed it, wrapped his fingers around the cool

steel, and looked down at the worn inscription “To Martin, with love”. This had been his grandfather’s most prized possession, a gift from Edmund’s grandmother.

Edmund poked his head back out the window. This time last year he was in Pennsylvania, beautifully ignorant and oblivious to what was going on at home. At this moment, he wanted to be back at Penn State, sitting in class, going out at night, tailgating before football games, like everyone else. And yet, he was here, in his old bedroom, sneaking a smoke.

His thoughts were interrupted when he heard a knock at his bedroom door. He quickly tossed the cigarette and closed the window.

“Come in.” His mother entered and Edmund noticed how old she looked. Her hair, once dark like his, was now speckled with gray, and he was sure he saw little wrinkles outlining features on her face. She threw the laundry basket she was holding onto his floor.

“Ed, I told you last night to do your laundry.” As she said this she glanced down at the mounds of clothes littering his floor. “And you could stand to clean the rest your room a bit. You’ve been home, what? Two weeks? Jesus, boy...”

“Whatever...” He couldn’t even look her in the eyes. “Just leave me alone.”

His mother sighed. “Don’t take it out on me, young man. I’ve been dealing with this a lot longer than you have.” She gave him the look, the one mothers give when they know they are right. Then she left.

Edmund knew she was right. He lay down on

his bed and tossed the lighter from hand to hand. He was in his room, packing for college, when his grandfather had given him the lighter. Edmund was leaving for Pennsylvania that very day. Pop had stood tall and strong, and told him stories of his college days. Edmund remembered the way his grandfather had poked his head out of the window, smoking his pipe. When he had finished he turned around and reached his leathery wrinkled hand into his pocket and retrieved the lighter. "I want you to remember how important this was to me," he said and gently handed it to Edmund.

Lying on his bed, Edmund recalled how Pop had lingered on the word 'remember' and understood the true meaning of that statement for the first time.

Edmund made his way across the University of North Carolina campus early on Monday morning. The dew on the ground dampened his leather Sperry's. The smell of wet leaves brought back thoughts of his own campus. Wincing, he ignored the 'hellos' and nods from passing students. His father had not been at home all weekend and Edmund desperately needed to talk to him; his only choice was to catch his father at work. He trudged up old stone steps and pulled open a heavy wooden door, glancing around to make sure he was in the history department. A secretary just inside the doorway informed him that his father was in class. So Edmund waited.

He sat in an uncomfortable leather chair in the lobby and enviously stared out the window at the

students on the quad. Regrettably, he had forgotten his cigarettes at home. He fidgeted in the chair and popped his knuckles so loudly that the secretary looked up from her desk. Edmund stood up and pretended to read the flyers posted on the bulletin board in the middle of the lobby. His father always gave long-winded lectures. He was about to give up waiting when the heavy wooden door opened and a tall man with a briefcase entered.

“Ed, I didn’t expect to see you until tonight.”

“Yeah, I’ve been waiting all morning. Not like I had anything better to do. And I wanted to talk to you.”

His father nodded, asked the secretary to forward his calls to voicemail, and led Edmund down a carpeted hallway until he turned into a doorway on the left.

“Have a seat.” His father gestured toward another uncomfortable leather chair. Edmund did not sit down. Merely out of habit his father played his voicemail messages, but Edmund wondered if he was trying to ignore him.

“Dad.” He interrupted a message from a drawling professor. His father looked up. Straight to the point, Edmund told himself. “I want to go back to school.”

“Nonsense.” His father pointed out that Edmund had already missed nearly half of the semester. “Now sit down.”

“You don’t understand. I *can’t* be here anymore.”

His father looked at him, narrowing his eyes. “I don’t understand? Oh, Ed, come on! Your mother and I can’t do this by ourselves...we need your help. I know it’s hard...”

Edmund finally sat down. “Pop doesn’t even remember I exist, Dad...”

“You need to be here for the family, for your grandfather.” His father sighed, took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

“He just stares at me like I’m a stranger. It’s...I don’t know...like it’s not even him, I can’t handle it.”

His father just shook his head and sighed again. “Ed, you know he has his moments. It’s hard, I know. But Pop moving in with us is the best thing for him. And you are going to remain here until we get him settled in, understand?”

Walking home, Edmund remembered at this moment was being dropped off at his grandparents’ house the summer he was eleven years old. His parents needed “some time alone.” Even then he knew that meant time with the couples therapist and maybe even time with the divorce lawyer. He remembered Pop standing beside him on the front porch, smoking his pipe. He always smelled like sweet tobacco. “Eddie,” he said, “Don’t worry, they’ll work it out, and if they don’t, I’ll make ‘em.” Then he winked. The wink replayed in Edmund’s mind.

Edmund spent the rest of the week helping move Pop’s belongings from his house into his new ‘home’ – the spare bedroom. Edmund had a hard time being around his grandfather now, and he didn’t quite understand why. He had hoped something would trigger Pop’s deteriorating memory these last few weeks. He had hoped Pop would recognize him and

tell him a story like he had years before. Nothing worked. The Alzheimer's was too progressed. He could only watch his grandfather walk around, confused, in a daze. Edmund had escaped the memory of the man he admired most, and he couldn't escape from that. He realized that now. All he could do was escape to his own bedroom and sneak a cigarette.

Sweetest Peach

Zach McMasters

Sweetest peach,
tangerine -
the citrus of
my searing dream.

Cigarettes and
hands that bite,
tears of sweat,
Turkish Delight.

Neon laughter,
rings on teeth,
hair in bundles -
lover's wreath.

My knees, your toes,
our skin so pale.

Your ear is close
as I exhale.

Blueberries

Timothy Shane Mitchell

*T*hey're quite beautiful fruits, blueberries
they ripen to such a lovely shade of blue.
She picks them with tender love

and care. You know, she picks, carries,
and sells them. The juicy flavor of fruit renew
This burning regret. Blueberries,

their succulent flavor give my mind wings like those
of demon fairies,
fluttering through my past, thinking of what I threw
Away. Thinking of lost fruit and lost love.

I was once like her. I picked Cherries.
But this world wasn't enough. so I Blew
it off. If only I knew how satisfyingly sweet those
blueberries

were. Time passes. Even fruit marries
with the earth. I didn't know who
we were, but I know there is no longer that sweet
love.

I chew on bittersweet thoughts, thoughts I hope she
buries
in my life the regrets are very few
save for the savory blueberries
and the sweet kiss of flavor that I still love.

The Party

Perri Hubbard

I hear the voice of my
Mother dishing out
her form of advice,
Better late than pregnant.
A whirl of laughter
emits from her friends,
then a cloud of smoke
billows from their mouths as
they puff cigarettes and giggle.

I spy from the kitchen,
while my father sneaks a piece of blueberry pie.

The Quiet Man

Sandy Morris

Best Nonfiction Award Winner

Furniture covered the floors of my grandmother's house. Homemade tables, bookcases, worn sofas, art deco chairs, corduroy recliners. Their placement had no rhythm of feng shui, no consideration for room-to-room travel, no thought. They were merely dropped in their place on the day of arrival and there they remained to fulfill my grandmother's purpose of un-emptying the house.

Seven days a week, my grandfather sat in the plaid orange and green recliner that leaned, crooked, against the corner of the wall. It faced the television that was situated less than two inches away from the front door across the room. From the recliner, he watched football games and the local news until my grandmother, as matriarch of the house, took the remote and turned the channel to the shows that she faithfully followed—*General Hospital*, *Murder She Wrote*, *Lifetime's Movie-of-the-Week*. He never stood up to defiantly leave the room, he just held tight to the arms of the chair and clenched his jaws that were packed full of chewing tobacco, his only connection to masculinity since she had banned his pipe smoking years ago.

He never spoke to me. I found him restlessly quiet and grew bored with him until his flannel shirts blended into the recliner and I forgot that he was

there. For years I rollerbladed through the house and barely missed running over his toes. I leaned against his legs when my grandmother and I sat in the floor to play Chinese checkers. At Christmas, I covered his socked feet with shreds of wrapping paper as I opened my gifts. He never spoke a word.

Like all of my cousins, I grew up and moved away. And like most of my cousins, when my grandfather had a stroke I didn't come back as soon as I should have. When I did, the furniture was gone. No more eclectic mesh of dated fabric and wood that proved that I had been there, my father had been there, my father's father had been there.

A metal hospital bed sat in the perfect center of the living room correctly perpendicular to the wall. And he lay in it, as quietly as he had sat in the recliner. His eyes moved slowly back and forth, back and forth, as my grandmother glided across the living room in her walker back and forth, back and forth. The left side of his lip drooped and he whispered almost inaudibly, "Waaa-eer".

My grandmother rolled across the kitchen linoleum and showed me how to mash my grandfather's dinner. When we were done, the banana resembled baby food, and I wondered if I would always think of my dying grandfather when I fed my future children.

I propped his head up into the crook of my arm and fed him one teaspoon full at a time. At that time, if I had experienced holding an infant, feeding it, being locked in its gaze like I was the only person of importance in this world, I would have felt comfortable in their sameness and their consistency

to the cycle of life. I wouldn't have moved my eyes away from the constant gaze of his. I would have touched his bald head for the first time or searched his face for my imperfections, like my nose or the dent in my chin.

That night, his kidneys stopped working, and all of the other organs followed. The ambulance took him away to die in a more modern room. The family followed behind in a procession of pick-up trucks and minivans.

In the hospital bed, his bright blue pajamas shone apart from the sterile pale, white sheets. We surrounded him, and listened to his slow breaths that seemed to hang in the air. No one in my life had ever died. I couldn't imagine the concept of not existing. It was unnatural to me and I felt guilty that it seemed like such a science experiment, to watch someone die. But as we circled the bed and heard the loud breath that wasn't followed by another, it felt tribal. I held hands with people who shared my blood—whom I hadn't seen in years— and cried because we had lost the elder of our tribe, not because we had seen him die.

At the funeral, we made quiet comments about his suit, the casket, how good the make-up looked on his face, but our eyes were on the droop of his mouth that still remained open. The funeral director, who had buried twenty years worth of old men, stood on the corner of the stage crying.

I got to know my grandfather during his funeral. He lay in the coffin in a gray suit I'd never seen him wear as someone else told pieces of his story.

When he was just a teenager, he had reluctantly become a farmer after his father died. He wore suit coats over his overalls. He married my grandmother the day he was shipped off during World War II and didn't come home until his leg was burned while he was fueling a plane. He had piled his children onto the orange and green recliner every night and read them Keats.

The past nine years, I have felt my grandfather lingering quietly. His shoes and flannel shirts still reside in his closet and the recliner was carried up from the basement and positioned back against the wall. Alzheimer's came to my grandmother, and brought him back to life for her. He is young again and he sits in the recliner thinking to himself and reading Keats while her eyes blankly stare at the TV screen. If I want to visit with him, I know that he will be there, both in the house and in her mind.

Because of my grandfather, I have fallen in love with Keats. His soul-baring love letters to the wishy-washy Fanny Brawne. His passion to stay part of the living, to write it all down, to be known. I imagine my grandfather was like him once. Before the furniture came.

Arrival in Wartburg, Germany

Patricia Puckett

I glance up at the open
waiting room door
to watch my father leave me
to attend to my misplaced mother
gone beyond the purple.

A steeped prison, the walls
stretching high above, bleeding
stripes—lavender and plum—
trapping me
as I await the unnamed sister.
My father, in a rare fever,
races back
to me—the other child—
and announces her arrival.

I would get to see
her soon, my father assures,
looking through me.
His word held, a fortelling squeak
drawing my eyes to the hospital's carriage
with her—so unclean—
inside, awaiting to greet
a person she couldn't care about,
flaky and cheesy and small.

I stare at the miracle of life
closely—unwilling to believe it—
watching the pink mass
stir under inspection.

Tiny—much smaller than the doll
I'd pretended was sister, crying against
life—like being born was so hard.

Before I could pass judgement,
the mass churned, its mouth
upturned, smiling
at me. Mass was no longer correct.
She had eyes—like I had—
A nose—like I had—
Fingers and toes—like I had.
My father's hug confirms
That she's mine to care for

...funny, I don't know her name.

Scarecrow
Zach McMasters

*B*ring me a cloud for this bucket of tears;
I'm as dry as the skin of a scarecrow.
The fruits of labor write my story,
talking numbers in static harmony.

I eat it quickly in my sleep, savoring
the scent of warm newspaper, delicate
like holy scripture. I can even smell it
like a newborn baby. It touches deeper
than any full moon, and sounds like murder

outside my bedroom window. I'm awake
and dreaming quite heavily now. The smoke

rises, expands, bringing an understanding
to the burning laughter in my lungs.

A Cardinal in the Driveway

Tricia Stevenson

Death caught her eye at
The very first glance:
The bright red cardinal Frannie
Killed and left as a bloody
Gift to her owner. She asks
Why the cat killed the
Cardinal and all I
Think to tell her is
Cats eat birds.

She looks at me amazingly
Knowingly, unnervingly unafraid.
Lily is four; captivated by cardinal
Death. *I'll die!*
She whispers, smiles sweetly.

She's seen death before
And told someone at the
Funeral my aunt died because her
Butt quit working. That's not exactly right
I say, but nothing else, nothing.
How can I teach her something I don't know.

Coolio in Schoolio

Brett Leslie

Your mom always complains about what you wear
And bitches at you to cut that hair.
You go to class; the teacher says you're late
But you don't care, your deep fried and baked.
So it's true that school is a drag
Sittin' in class gives ya symptoms of jet lag.

School administrators direct your path
But you say fuck that and dip out of math.
Smokin' in the boys' room is what you best
But the principal walks in and says, "give it a rest."
Sittin' in the office twiddlin' thumbs
your superiors say you're destined a bum.
Expelled for a week is the price you pay
But you don't care you'll be out in May.

Some think life sucks; it's too much to bear
But you go on livin' without worry or care.
Back home showing your mom the slip,
she looks at you about to flip.
Flyin' off the handle she calls your dad
And from sound of the voice you can tell he's mad.
He says, "I'll take care of you when I get off work",
That old man has always been a jerk.

So you go to your room and throw on a tape,
Beastie Boys playin' their goin' irate.
The rhythm and beats rattle the walls,
as you stare at the poster of Biggie Smalls.

Geometry

Amber Busha

I'll never forget that moment: Children's Hospital,
Masks, curtains, gloves. You writhing, convulsing.
That mess of cold

Metal, paper sheets, and ugly tubes. I don't even
know how

Many machines violated your body. I hated them
For keeping you alive, for making you suffer.

You were fighting. I didn't know for what. Fighting
to live,

Fighting to die, fighting to respond to my words.
Maybe you

Were fighting the pain that had consumed your body,
climaxing

At that moment, the same moment my Emotions
overflowed.

I think you were fighting for Heaven, Soul and Body
dueling

Painfully, one wanting to stay, the other needing to
go—

I was seated in Geometry as you were walking into
heaven.

Eulogy

Matt Mallard

*D*ear Mrs. Reich,
Dearest Mrs. Reich,
My Mrs. Reich,

For once in my life, it seems as though when it comes to you, I don't know what to say. No, that's not right. I do know what to say. I've been trying desperately to cling to the memories I have of you. I start with an early spring morning, and there are several of us huddled around your desk at break, the window in the corner open, the soft breeze bringing with it the aroma of the azaleas planted under the window. And we can't stay away from you hardly any time at all, because at lunch, we're holding down the fort while you rush outside to take your Mercedes for a spin around the local county roads to snatch a quick smoke break.

But even before that, I see our 10th grade American History CP class. You're seated at your desk, your glasses on the edge of your narrow nose, your silver bracelets jingling on your slender wrists, and your sand-dollar silver earrings swaying from your ears. Your brow takes on a dark look as you reach under the desk, getting ready to take your flip-flop and chunk it at John Mears after he asks you a ridiculous question. Before we know it, you're up at the chalkboard. As you hold the yellow piece

of chalk, you begin to write in your ever-so skilled calligraphy, dates and names and places that we should remember and write down in our notes. I lean over to Dana, one of my note-buddies, and make sure I'm getting it down right. Alex, from the other side of me, then has to ask me so he can get it down right. All the time, we're whispering, giggling, not yet fully immersed in Mrs. Reich's World. As you finish writing on the board, you toss your now two pieces of chalk onto the metal tray, brushing your hands together as it sends a cloud of yellow dust into the air the size of the clouds over Hiroshima after Truman ordered the attack in 1945.

We get Mercantilism and the American Revolution engraved in our heads. We all pass the Midterm. We move on into the Civil War. We finish the semester. We are "History Scholars!" Somewhere in there, one of us had the great idea to have a sleepover at your house. "You bring the alcohol, and I'll bring the cigarettes!" You laugh at the idea. Somehow, not too long after that, we find ourselves huddled in your kitchen as you make us coffee you know we won't drink.

The tradition continues, as we move on to the Eleventh grade. Having already had you in class, having already stolen the spirit-stick, which was under your supervision and care, from the Class of 04, we ventured into the next part of American History. Yellow journalism, the World Wars, and the Bay of Pigs is on the books for this year's syllabus.

Next thing we know, we're entering our senior year. Not only are we about to make one of the most

incredible and drastic changes in our lives, but we also don't have you for a class. We do our thing, go out in style, leave our mark on the school. For better or worse, we definitely left our mark. Then we're off to the Caribbean on our Senior Cruise. In what was quite easily one of the best weeks of my life, we attempted to say our goodbyes while making a few new memories we knew would last forever. I always remember you telling me two distinct things on our cruise. 1.) "When you marry someone, make sure you don't just love them. Make sure you like them. Because the giddy stage of love doesn't last forever. I love Philip, but I also like Philip. I like the kind of person he is. I like what he stands for. I like how he treats other people. He's my best friend." And 2.) "Some of the best friends you'll ever have you'll meet in college." At the time, the first made good sense. The second, not so much. I couldn't imagine being closer to a group of people than I was with the History Scholars, but you were right. As we all embarked on our own paths, we found less free-time to sit down and call up an old friend. But there's still something special about us. We may not be as close as we once were, but we have something that few other people can ever dream of having. And that will always make us special.

So I guess I do know what to say. I can say that you are the most incredible human being I've ever known. Whenever I'd get the rare occasion to drive over from Florence to come visit you one afternoon, you'd always tell me, "You'll have to help yourself. I'm not going to get up and get it for you. You're not a guest

here.” You never treated us like children (except when you were treating us like your own children), and you never judged us. You didn’t always like what we did and you made sure we knew it, but you never judged us.

When Ben called me up a couple weeks ago to give me the news, I could only think of one thing. I remember you telling me that if there were two things you knew anything about, it was history and interior decorating. You had told me that whenever I got out of college and got an apartment, you would help me fix it up. And as I was talking to Ben, I couldn’t help but think about that apartment that will never get your magic touch. And I can’t help but to think now in regret that I didn’t get a chance to come see you here recently. Or that I didn’t make the time. I just can’t imagine this world without you. And as I can’t help but to think that you leaving is going to rip a whole in my heart, my heart does begin to soften.

Because if you had not been in my life, then I wouldn’t have these beautiful memories of a beautiful woman who because she took a few more minutes out of her day to connect with a student made all the difference in my life. I am not who I am today without you. I’ll say it again incase you didn’t get it—I am not who I am today without you. But how can I be greedy? We’ve had seven wonderful years with you, and we’ll all see each other again someday. I believe that. I just can’t help but to think of all the talks I still imagined having with you. I imagined myself a few years from now when I finish my Master’s, coming up the stone walk to your front

door. Knocking and trying the door because it's always unlocked, I'd peer apprehensively into the front hall, peek into the dining room and Philip's study, and find you standing in the kitchen filling up your mug with coffee in one hand and a cigarette burning in the other. I'd imagine I'd sit down with you in your large, overstuffed-down couches, and tell you how my life was, tell you about my worldly experiences, expose my soul to you more deeply than I ever had before. And you'd tell me about your sons and your grandchildren. You'd tell me about Philip and how his band practice is going, how his latest case is beginning to drain him. You'd tell me about your latest home improvement project.

Now, I imagine myself going back to England one day. And remembering your story of how you sobbed over the list of dead American soldiers in St. Paul's. I'll see the Thames and see you in its spontaneity and reliability.

I hope to be like you one day. Strong. Courageous. Funny. Intelligent. Genuine. Tolerant. I want to be that kind of person. I only feel like my greatest contribution to your memory would be to pass those things on to other people. I wish I could be there with you when you read this. I wish I could be there, just telling you or reading this to you myself. I wish I could just sit and talk with you for hours and hours as we watch episode after episode after episode of Law and Order or HGTV. I always knew that if there was anyone who would tell me the truth straight to my face, then it was you. I got an awfully strong craving for that wisdom of yours in the past few

weeks. I kept telling myself, as soon as this play is over, I'll go see her. As soon as I have some free time, I'll go see her.

Well, now I'm taking my free time to write you this letter. To reemphasize in case I never told you enough or never made it quite clear enough just how much I love you. I think just hearing your voice, with its snide and sarcastic undertones but its honest and compassionate cadence, would make everything okay.

It's so hard to imagine life without you. But you must know that we'll be okay. Because we have each other. And we had you. And for that, we couldn't be more blessed.

I'm not sure what to say now that I've reached the end. Usually, I suppose it should be goodbye, but those are too depressing, too sad. So how about a "Bon Voyage," and I'll be seeing you real soon. You must know that we'll never forget you and everything you did for us. You'll always be in our hearts.

Much, much love to you and your family, always,

Matthew Mallard

Obituary

Cayla Buttram

Keep dancing on her grave
as you pen your words.
Not how she wanted to be remembered, exactly,
but you are, after all, the journalist
Writing the obituary.
She has no say—her words have been silenced.
Your words tell the world,
in plain black-and-white,
of your remembrances:
The lack of a loss at all for you.
The impartial newsprint is your ally;
The world cannot see or feel from your words
Her bright smile or the warmth of her affection.
So, painting the picture of her shortcomings—
Her faults and hidden crevices,
Her broken heart, and
Her emerald eyes now darkened with shadows—
is okay. She's dead.
And you foolishly don't consider the man she loves,
Watering her cracked tombstone with his tears,
Sitting on the barren grass,
Head in hands,
Blaming you
For killing all that was left of her...
With your words.

2.26.09

Ego Death

Brett Leslie

*T*he horizon is wavy,
heat resonating off August pavement.
Marshmallow clouds juxtapose gelatin skies,
colors radiating from every orifice
of the subconscious,
creating complex geometric shapes
that move in synchronization,
free-floating,
in a new three dimensional space.

The figures on stage made entirely of
energy, permeate light which knows
NO boundaries.

Communication with the crowd,
strange faces with kaleidoscope eyes,
established. Jugglers' manual dexterity
manifest all the while fire breathers
and stilt walkers perform during intermission.
The art language powered by rhetoric,
humanized and transfused through
melody and rhythm. The music
takes over consciousness and body...
the audience lets go, stepping through
THE DOOR...
freed from ego.

*God loves his head
Off with his children, yeah!*

Brett Leslie

I might as well...
the waves hit the wall
headlight through my window
like the fire drill
Run around around...

Break the wall
can't see my window
shinin' on but nobody's home.
Everybody wants to be ...
The lights are off... the fire drill
Run around around around...

Cut ties
Now I might as well
...god...
The cars hiss by my window
Like the chimney
Release me
Release me

You can keep the beach
I got this girl beside me
...she's out of reach

Eyes peer in...
headlights through my window
I got this girl beside me
But...

pig mouth
Zach McMasters

Oh honey oh
god let me eat
your perfect shoulder
for a second I
won't bleed it
while your spinal
sexing little finger
touches teeth in
time I'll have you
choke I'll choke
on protons slippery
tendons snapping happy
to be tasting lines &
dips & caps cuisine-o
yeah I'm wide n
ready for the V so
finely formed the hair
is warm it chokes
i choke del
eat I choke

*t*he wind blows
the sky
across a puddle in
the driveway -
ripples, static for
t h e e y e
bugs. mommy bugs - flies! on the television screen
a rush of
blood,
standing up and
i'm down
on the pavement, picking
l a e s from the water
e v

Springspiration

Pratik Pramtora

My nerves are on the edge
My life has seemed too much for me
I've lost all faith in worldly things
I do not know where to turn
I'm surrounded by despondency, despair and
hopeless feelings.

Step back, think
The river beneath the pool does not flow the same
Sometimes it's high, sometimes low
Sometimes goes in circles – fast or slow...

Step B-A-C-K think realize
God installed creative force within you
You've your inner self
To rely upon, to lean upon, to call upon.
I won't fail you if you don't fail it.
Picturize your worries and fears fading
See the sun emerging within the clouds
Make sure you have shades with UV protection ;-)
See yourself restore your confidence
Your faith in life and living.

Before any incident occurs in the outside world
It occurs in the inside
Our consciousness is separated
Into One that is awake
Other that works 24 hours
The conscious
And the subconscious
Both form an iceberg

The top is the tip
Only 10% limited power
Confined by time and space
Yet called the boss
Subconscious – the creative core
Is all but the tip
90% unlimited power and planning
Confined to nothingness –
The genie, the servant.
At solar plexus behind the stomach in the abdomen
Is the throne of the subconscious mind.
Propelling infinite cosmic intelligence
In this world
In this room – In you
In the branches that you hold
In the roots of your leg
Stretching far, vast and beyond.

Install a small mighty thought
Set your target
Add emotion, passion, dedication
Visualize your goal for 20 minutes daily
Wait patiently for the result...

You have the tools to victory
Fasting, silence, prayer
Positive thinking, meditation.

Block delete discard all negative commands
Drag each harsh document to the recycle bin
And hit enter to permanently remove them.

Earn, learn, love and serve
What you conceive and believe
Thou shalt achieve.

Your subconscious is the light in your darkest moments

Your subconscious cultivates strength for you

Take everything in a positive stride

Take each day as it comes

Let each petal roll itself out

Smile when it is ready and blooms.

Go achieve your goals

But do not violate the rights of others

May the spring of inspiration

Always flow in your life.

The Storm

Pratik Pramtora

Winds of excitement
Wings of freedom
Eyes full of hope
Flourishing future
Opening opportunities
Cherishing choices
Spring of inspiration.

Prospero, Ferdinand, Miranda
Actors, artisans, audience
Created the magic
Flooded the stage with light
Music in the air
Lifting all spirits
Transcending to Temptation Island.

The feeling, the confession
Embracing water
Drowning success
Seeds of failure germinating
Thorns of rejection piercing
I am a cactus
I am an ugly cactus
I am not a bird
I shall not bloom
I hurt people
I am horrible.

The yellow has lost colour
It has lost valour
It is no longer bright
No longer lightening
It's been sucked by bees
It's been exploited
Unfed, unnourished.

The golden has gone pale
Muffled, muted, sick
It shall never regain
It shall please no eye
Cannot be dyed.

maybe

Matt Mallard

*k*nowing
it was “wrong”
feeling
it was right
you kiss me
lips warm
yet cool
chapped and cracked
pink
by the sun, wind
sweeping through
your brown hair
your brown shadow
prickly 'gainst mine

aware
of your engagements
that would
or “should”
have kept you
otherwise preoccupied
maybe you weren't
thinking
about commitments
or maybe
you didn't care

I'd be lying
/selfishly/
if I said I cared

and maybe
a phase,
fleeting fancy
of the mind
our mind(s)
an immature moment
of curiousness.
or maybe not.
maybe it meant
more to me
than to you.
and maybe not.

maybe your eyes
(sea blue, clear,
always make me
feel like you
see me,
not just see me)
were bright as the sun
and warm as its rays
or inescapable
like dawn
and unreceptive as night.

But you were with me.

I stood
on the sand
cold
lifeless
with the waves
shades of gray
sweeping under
our feet
watching myself

reflected
as a tear
crawls down a cheek.
I knew
I knew
nothing at all.

The Broken Box

Amber Busha

Where was I when you left?

It was as if you had never existed,
No books on the floor of I Love Yous on the fridge.

The locked box I kept you in so tightly—broken.
Still wondering how you grew those wings, I
Was so sure to clip them, them and

Your dreams. How did I lose you?
Like losing a dog on a leash that you've beat until
It no longer remembers freedom, or wanting it.

It no longer remembers freedom, or wanting it,
Like losing a dog on a leash that you've beat. Until
Your dreams...how did I lose you?

Was so sure to clip them; them and
Still wondering how you grew those wings. The
Locked box. I kept you in so tightly—broken.

No books on the floor or I Love Yous on the fridge.

It was as if you had never existed.

Where was I when you left?



Unwanted Creatures

Matt Mallard

Merriam Weatherford had always considered herself an excellent reader of people. She could remember even from an early age that her ability to peg others was inscrutable. For instance, when she was but five years of age, a new preacher had come to her church. She knew from the first Sunday he stood at the pulpit, something was amiss with the man. She tried to tell her parents, but they only laughed and told her to give the new elder a chance. Not one month later, rumors were flying around the church that he was carrying on an affair with one of the sisters and one of the deacons. Another month and another preacher was standing in the pulpit. Though her skills had yet to be honed, she knew right then she was exceptional.

Another time, when she was fourteen, her mother remarried. Merriam knew her stepfather was no good from the first moment she met him, and after four years of abusing her mother and verbally abusing Merriam, he was gone as quickly as a lighting bug's flash. Again, when she was twenty-two, she met her husband for the first time and knew instantly he would be the man she married. There were countless other times when Merriam had met someone and pegged the stranger immediately.

It was because of this innate gift of hers for judging character that she didn't think twice about picking up

the man on the side of the highway. He was standing with one hand in the pocket of his worn, muddy jeans and the other with his thumb sticking out toward the road. She took one glance at the man and knew instantly he was a good man, hard worker, and just down on his luck. It was her duty to help him on his way.

Merriam maneuvered her maroon Buick sedan to the side of the road just ahead of the hitchhiker. She snatched the most recent copy of *The National Enquirer* that occupied the front passenger's seat—the one with the blazed headlines on the cover proclaiming Oprah's most recent lesbian affair and the mystery behind Tom Cruise's alien baby—and tossed it into the back seat.

"Hop on in!" She greeted the man heartily. He muttered a thanks in reply and took a seat beside her as he shuffled his scuffed boots into the floorboard to the right of Merriam's enormous bag. She never had any impulse to move her purse closer to her or to the back seat; she trusted this man.

"So, where you headed?" She asked warmly.

"Iuka."

"Really! I've got family from that neck of the woods. My mom's family was good ole' Mississippi people. My dad's family, they were from North Alabama, and that's where I'm from. I'm headed back home, but Iuka's on the way. This is your lucky day, son!"

"Son" didn't offer a response. He stared out the window at the passing Mississippi countryside and the wide-open fields of growing cotton that wouldn't be ready to pick until November.

“It’s a hot one out there,” Merriam observed. “I think it’s just crazy how early summer starts down here in the South. Here it is, not even the end of May, and the temperatures are already hitting the low nineties. The weatherman said it might even hit 95 by the end of the week! I contemplate every year moving north, but I never can seem to tear myself away from this good ole’ place. Besides, the winters are a killer up north anyway. And as old as I am, it’d be just silly to leave what little family I have here and cart my life somewhere across the country.”

The man made a grunting noise that Merriam took for agreement.

“So where are you from?”

“Here and there,” the passenger replied.

“Oh, so you’re a traveling man! A rambler! How excitin’! I always did want to travel, but I never was able to. I got married, had me a few kids, but when Harold died, I just couldn’t make myself visit all the places we had always talked about goin’. He wanted to see the Eiffel Tower in Paris and the pyramids in Egypt and the Great Wall of China. ‘Course, he never did like the Asians much. He fought during Korea and Vietnam, and he never could forgive those Japs for what they did to our fine men in uniform at Pearl Harbor.

“You ever served in the forces?”

“No.”

“Well, one of our sons did, and we was always so proud of him. I really didn’t want him to go, at first, scared that he’d get blasted away by some of them crazies over there in the Gulf, but we was proud of

‘im nonetheless. Well, I guess Connor’s about your age! How old are you anyway?”

“Early thirties.”

“Why that’s how old Connor is! He’ll be, now let me think, he was born in . . . , yeah, yeah, I guess he’ll be thirty-three this year. My, how time gets along. Now he’s married—a really sweet girl from Huntsville—you know where that is?”

“No.”

“Really! It’s the nation’s capitol of aerospace travel! Well, anyway, they’ve got two kids, Grace and Harry. He’s named after Harold. Grace is an angel, but Harry is high-spirited and he’s not yet three! But he’s gonna to be like his granddaddy, that I guarantee you! Yes sirree! You got any kids of your own?”

“Don’t think so.” The man’s comment caught Merriam off-guard for a moment, but she didn’t want the man to feel she was judging him. She kept her head toward the road as she stole a glance at him out of the corner of her eye and kept up the conversation.

“Well they’re just a blessin’, I tell you. They’re a handful, and kids are awfully expensive these days, but they’re worth it. They really are.”

The man cleared his throat uncomfortably, which drew Merriam’s attention. His face was turned away from her as he studied the clear, blue sky hanging above the oaks whizzing by off the highway.

“Why, heavens!” She exclaimed suddenly, nearly frightening the man off his seat.

“What.”

“I musta forgotten my manners! Where my head is these days, I don’t know! My name is Merriam. I

figure if we're gonna be travelin' companions for the next little while, you gotta know my name."

She paused, expecting the man to give her his name. He didn't.

"So, you got family in Iuka?"

"Not really."

"Well, what brings you to this here parts? Or better yet, what gets you stuck out here on the side of the road on such a toasty day?"

"Nothing really."

"Just doin' some sightseein' huh?"

"Something like that."

"Well, ain't that something. You just better watch yourself. Hitchhiking back in my day was one thing. People were trustworthy generally, but these days, there's a bunch of crazies in the world! Ever since the seventies, there seems to be an outburst of men pickin' up poor little girls off the side of the road and doin' unmentionable things to 'em and then killin' em. Just an awful world we live in, but you can trust us Southerners. We've prided ourselves for centuries on the outstanding hospitality and good-naturedness that you just can't find nowhere else in the country. And believe me, I know!" Merriam paused for a moment.

"Well, actually, I guess I don't know, since I've never been out of the South, but from what I hear, we're pretty nice.

"So, you got business in Iuka?"

"Maybe."

"Spoken like a true ramblin' man! I admire that. You young people these days just go where the wind

blows you, and I really admire that. I wish I had more guts to do somethin' like that. If I did, I tell you, I'd pack up and move off to the jungles of South America. Live with the monkeys! You ever seen a monkey?"

"No," the man sighed heavily.

"No? Not even at a zoo! We should stop at a zoo before I drop you off in Iuka! I just can't believe you've never seen a monkey. The similarities between monkeys and humans are remarkable. Anyone who can say we didn't evolve from those creatures are just stupid."

"I don't believe in evolution."

"Oh, really?" Merriam asked as the pitch of her voice got higher.

"Really. And I assumed, with you living in the Bible belt and everything, you wouldn't believe in evolution either."

"Well," Merriam laughed nervously. "I don't think it matters enough to get into an argument. Who cares how God created man? We're here aren't we?"

The man didn't reply. Merriam snuck another glance over at her passenger. He continued to watch the scenery go by. Merriam stared down at his plain gray t-shirt and could see the outline of his broad chest muscles. Her eyes traveled to his tattered dark-gray jeans and on to his shabby black boots. The man appeared as though he needed money and needed it badly. She turned her attention back to the road and was momentarily blinded by the sun's high rays reflecting wildly off her two right-hand rings as she steered the wheel. The ring finger of her left

hand still displayed her large wedding set, and she wondered if the man was eyeing it with interest.

Merriam checked her hair in the rearview mirror. Her hair was done-up well for an old lady, and she was dressed smartly and without hindrance. She had come rolling up to this man in her \$100,000-plus Buick sedan. What could I have possibly been thinking, she wondered to herself. Suddenly the car seemed much smaller than before, and Merriam had difficulty breathing.

“So, do you have a trade?” She asked, trying to regain her composure.

“I’ve got a buddy in Iuka I’m gonna stay with for a few weeks ‘till I can find me a job.”

Great, Merriam thought. He probably has no money.

“How about we pull over for a minute?” Merriam asked.

“Huh?”

“I just thought we could stretch our legs for a moment. Get some fresh air?” Merriam glanced up ahead and saw a sign proclaiming “Corinth Flea Market: 1 mi ahead on left.” She had always thought such establishments were tacky, but she felt if she didn’t get out of the car immediately, she would implode.

“That looks delightful,” she said aloud, turning on her right blinker.

“I’d really rather not,” the man said quickly. “I’d like to just get where I’m goin’.”

“No harm in stopping. After all, it’s not the destination that makes the journey, but what you experience along the way.”

“Really,” the man grumbled under his breath, as he slouched down in his seat.

“It’ll be fun!” Merriam said.

“That would depend on your definition of fun.” Merriam steered her sedan across the highway and into the parking lot of the flea market. She slung the car into an empty parking space and jerked up the emergency brake, nearly throwing the man through the windshield.

“Are you crazy?” The man asked between short breaths.

“Aren’t we all a little crazy? That’s why you should always wear your seatbelt.”

“Thanks for the tip.”

Merriam led the way into the flea market with the man a few feet behind her.

“Come along now,” she said. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were embarrassed to be seen with me!”

The man offered no reply as they began to survey the endless tables of junk. Collectable beanie-babies, crappy t-shirts, and second-hand furniture littered the aisles of the market. Merriam and the man squeezed through the lane made through the center of the bazaar until they finally stopped at a table displaying a wide variety of pocket-knives.

“Ya know what?” Merriam said. “I’m gonna to get you a present.”

“That’s really not necessary,” the man assured her.

“No, really,” she insisted. “I think since we’ve been travelin’ buddies, I should get you somethin’.”

“You really don’t have to,” the man said, almost

pleading.

“I know I don’t have to. But I want to. How about one of these knives? Every man needs a pocket knife. You never know when it might come in handy. My Harold collected guns and pocket knives. He’s got ‘em from a bunch of different countries, the ones he served in. They’re in display cases in the study. I still keep ‘em polished and lookin’ like new. He’d be so proud of me for doin’ that. You know how Southerners love their weapons! I miss him so much. But I can still go into his study and just sit down at the desk, and I can still smell him. That familiar aroma of cigars and shaving salve. You would have liked Harold. He was a man’s man if ever there was—” Merriam was interrupted by an extremely loud gunshot that flooded the entire market. She screamed and clutched her purse to her chest.

“It’s alright, ma’am,” the gentlemen behind the table told Merriam. “That’s just the Civil War battle reenactment goin’ on just down the road.”

“Oh, my,” Merriam said as she steadied herself. “For a moment, I thought . . . oh, never mind. Just the silly whims of an old lady.” She let go of her purse and returned it to its usual place over her shoulder.

“Say,” Merriam said, nudging her companion. “Why don’t we go down and check out that reenactment. Whadaya say?”

“I’d really like to be getting on my way,” the man answered.

“Oh, come on! It’ll be fun, cultural, and educational.” Merriam dragged the man by the arm back to the parking lot. More gunshots began to fill

the air as they walked down the block and found the Corinth Civil War Memorial Battlefield.

“All this war is makin’ me famished,” Merriam said as she spotted a hotdog stand. “How about us getting’ some lunch?”

“I am kinda hungry,” the man answered.

“Finally!”

“What?”

“You’re finally letting me buy you somethin’!”

Merriam dug through her purse until she found her wallet and pulled out a ten to pay the vendor. The two companions took their hotdogs and sweet-teas and made their way toward a crowd of people to get a closer look at the battle. Set on a gently sloping yard with a few trees and a tall white monument, the battle consisted of about twenty men in gray uniforms and twenty men in blue uniforms. They stood across the way from each other, about fifty yards apart, and shot their rifles loaded with blanks at the opposite side.

“Brother fighting brother, father fighting son, neighbor fighting neighbor!” A historian in the middle of the crowd was attempting to yell above the gunfire his narration of the “pivotal battle” of Corinth.

“Yeah,” Merriam laughed. “So ‘pivotal’ that they’ll never mention it in your high school American history class.”

Merriam and the man continued to watch the battle as the soldiers began to fall. One of the gray. Two of the blue. Another one of the gray. And another. Another blue. Three more gray. And so on, and so on, until no one was left alive.

“Well, that’s silly,” Merriam said. “They can’t all die.”

As the rest of the crowd dispersed and congratulated the actors on their wonderful and brave portrayals of Union and Confederate soldiers, Merriam made her way through the smoke-coated battlefield to a small gravestone.

“Can you read that?” Merriam asked the man. “I can hardly make it out.”

“We care not whence they came / Dear in their lifeless clay / Whether unknown or known to fame / Their cause and country still the same / They died—and wore the gray.”

“Well, isn’t that touching,” Merriam said as she shuffled through her purse for a tissue. She first dabbed the corners of her eyes and then wiped the sweat off her forehead.

“Sounds kinda stupid to me,” the man replied.

“I wouldn’t expect you to find it touching,” Merriam said, suddenly turning cold. “You haven’t served in the forces like my Harold and Connor did. You don’t know what people have had to sacrifice for this country.”

“Because I don’t support the Confederates? Because they fought to protect slavery?”

“They fought for their way of life.”

“It doesn’t make it right.”

“Those boys in gray fought for what they believed in and died for what they believed in.”

“So do terrorists! Does that mean that they’re justified to blow up buildings and kill innocent people?”

Merriam stood by the monument staring at the man. Two young men, one in a blue uniform and one in a gray uniform, ran by them toting a massive Rebel flag and shouting, "Long live the South!" and "The South will rise again!" But the display of pride did not stir the locked gaze between Merriam and the man.

"None of us are innocent," Merriam said. She returned her tissue to the depths of her bag and looked up suddenly at the man with a wide smile on her face. "Ready to go? I could use the air conditioner!" She dropped her empty cup and hotdog wrapper beside the monument and led the man back to her car.

Once back in the car, with the AC blasting on max and Hank Williams pouring from the speakers, Merriam's car had found the highway. Its passengers remained silent until they had put Corinth in the rearview mirror.

"Do you want me to take you to a specific place in Iuka?" Merriam asked. "If you just give me the address, I'm sure we can stop and ask for directions. Or I might even be able to find it. I'm pretty good at navigating myself when it comes down to it. Now Harold, he was positively horrible at following directions, and you know men and how they are. He never wanted to stop and ask for help."

"You can just let me off at the Iuka exit."

"Now, I'm sure not going to let you do that! I picked you up on the highway, and I feel like we've gotten to know each other pretty well, so I'm not about to just drop you back off on the side of the road."

"Really, it's quite okay."

“Well, if that’s what you really want, I guess I can’t say no. I never could say no to a soft-eyed man. My Harold was soft on the eyes. I wish you could have met him. He was such a nice man. Well-mannered and a hard worker, much like yourself, I’m sure. He didn’t have your sense of adventure though.” Merriam traveled deep into another one of her memories, but she was hardly paying any attention to what she was saying. A sign flew by that let her know Iuka was only seven miles away. Seven more miles. Seven more minutes. She wondered what the man was thinking. Merriam seriously doubted the man was actually listening to what she was saying. Surely, the man would be thinking, I can take seven more minutes of this old brawd. Then I’ll be on my way, and I’ll never have to deal with her again.

Merriam wondered if the man felt sorry for her. She had no one to talk to. Her children were grown and had plenty to keep them busy. Harold had barely been dead five months, and she just wanted someone to listen to her and share some time with. Merriam stopped her random string of thoughts and tuned in to what was actually coming out of her mouth. Some nonsense about Harold and their wedding.

“Oh!” Merriam exclaimed suddenly.

“What,” the man asked in a dismissive tone.

“That car just flew by me doing well over 90, I’m sure. But she was a nice gal.”

“How do you know?”

“Oh, I can just tell. See, I’ve been blessed with the gift to read people. I’m a reader. All I had to do was see the side of the girl’s face, and I knew she was a

nice girl. I have no doubt that she was hurrying off to help a friend or tend to her sick mother.”

The man snickered from the seat beside her, but Merriam ignored him. So he didn’t care. He obviously didn’t care two cents about her and her generosity. Blinking a tear out of her eye, Merriam looked ahead in the road just in time to see a gray armadillo slowly crawl across the road into her lane. Before she knew it, she heard a squishing crack and felt the car thump.

“Dear me!” Merriam laughed as she wiped a tear off her cheek. “Wasn’t that thrilling?”

“Thrilling?” the man asked.

“No? I always find it thrilling to rid the earth of unwanted creatures. Possums. Squirrels. Armadillas. They’re all such revolting plagues to this planet, and though I’m not necessarily out for a kill, I never avoid the chance to get one of ‘em. And boy, did I get him good!” Merriam was sure the man was rolling his eyes just out of her line of sight. She continued to stare at the road, counting the white stripes running by on the cement, hoping they’d lead them to Iuka very soon. Luckily, they did.

“Well, here we are.” Merriam pulled over to the side of the highway. Just ahead of them stood a green Iuka exit sign.

“That’s great,” the man said. “But before I go, I want to give you something for all your trouble.” He reached down into his pocket, and Merriam expected him to pull out a twenty. A ten, she thought, would be sufficient. Instead of a greenback, however, she was suddenly introduced to a silver switchblade.

“Oh my,” she said calmly.

“Give me your money,” the man ordered.

“Dear me,” Merriam said, searching to see if maybe there was a state trooper in eyesight. Maybe she could flag down someone if she had to. “Wait a second,” she said. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Recognize it?” The man turned his knife over and the sunlight reflected off the blade. “You should. You offered to buy it for me at the flea market.”

“You stole it! We could have gotten caught! You could have gotten us both arrested!”

“Stop trying to stall for time and give me your money, or I’ll cut your fuckin’ throat, bitch!”

“Okay. Okay. Let me just get my purse, and you can have any cash that I have.” She slowly reached for the bag sitting in the floorboard by the man. She gently placed it in her lap and began searching for her wallet. “I know it’s in here somewhere. Silly me. Harold always said I carried too much stuff with me, even for a woman. I would just laugh and tell him what did he know, and then—”

“Did I ask for a fucking story?” The man asked. “Just give me your money. Now.”

“Okay. Here it is. I knew it was here somewhere, I just had to find it.” Merriam retrieved her wallet from the caverns of her bag and opened it up.

“Just be glad you’re not any younger,” the man told her. “I might want to leave with more than just your money.”

Merriam smiled nervously as she inspected her wallet. “How’s two dollars, and,” she counted her change, “thirty-seven cents.”

The man paused from shock. Disappointment. Then outrage.

“Two thirty-seven! Are you kidding me? Two fucking thirty-seven!”

“That’s it! I’m sorry. I don’t really keep much cash on me anyway, and then I bought our lunch today.”

“You’re sorry? You’re sorry? You are sorry! I want your jewelry and your credit cards, too.”

“Okay. You can have my jewelry. They have more sentimental value than anything for me. Harold used to buy me jewelry on all our anniversaries, and I—”

“I don’t give a shit! Your credit cards!”

“Oh, well, I don’t have any credit cards with me. You can have my checkbook, though. I have a little bit of money in the bank. They’re still trying to settle Harold’s life-insurance, so I haven’t gotten it yet.”

Merriam looked into the man’s eyes and knew he was debating right then whether he should slash her throat or not. She doubted that he wanted her blood on his hands, but she wasn’t sure he could control his rage much longer. She could feel her heart start to race, but it wasn’t a feeling of panic that began to flood her body. Merriam realized it was more a feeling of excitement and adrenaline.

“Okay. I see you’re unhappy,” she said.

“Really, dumbass?”

“What about this.” Merriam felt a smile slowly spread on her mouth as she dug around in her bag again. Before the man realized what was happening, Merriam had a black barrel pointed in his face. “Well, hows about it? You want this, mister?”

“What the fuck!”

“Well? Huh? Do ya? How’s it feel to have a lethal weapon pointed in your face? You know how it feels now, dontcha? Now, you give me all your money.”

“Are you insane, bitch? I already told you, I have no money!”

“No money, huh? None whatsoever?” Merriam reflected for a moment as she let this new feeling of adventure soak into her bloodstream. It was an incredible feeling. She hadn’t felt this good since sex with Harold in their thirties. “Don’t make me search you. I think I’d get more pleasure out of that than you would.” The man reached in his back pocket and pulled out a twenty and a ten.

“Here, you old money grubbing whore.”

“Now, now, that doesn’t sound like thanks to me, does it? You should be grateful to someone who gives you a lift and helps you on your way.”

“Yeah, well if I knew you were gonna rob me, maybe I’d rather have been stuck back there.”

“You see, I told you I was an extraordinary reader of people.”

“But you were wrong about me,” the man said.

“No I wasn’t. If this long life of mine has taught me anything, it’s you can’t trust anyone. From the time I was fourteen to eighteen, I went to sleep every night to the sounds of my stepfather slapping and punching my mother. When my mother was finally able to get a divorce, I swore to myself that I would never let any man treat me like that. Thank God, I found Harold, who taught me how to protect myself.”

“You were the one who put yourself in this situation, not me.”

“Maybe so, but you put yourself in this situation. We’re all responsible for our own actions.”

“That’s a really nice lesson, lady. And it’s only cost me thirty, fuckin’ dollars.”

“Don’t be in such a rush to leave,” Merriam said as she felt bolder and bolder by the second. “Let’s just say, um, how did you put it? Just be glad you aren’t any older. I might want to leave with just your money.”

“You can forget it.” The man said once he realized what Merriam was getting to. He began to fidget in his seat, and Merriam could see the beads of sweat begin to gather on his forehead.

“Gun,” Merriam reminded him with a smile.

* * *

As Merriam crossed the bridge over the Tennessee River into her hometown, she looked in the seat beside her. A mischievous smile broke out across her wrinkled face. There sat, instead of her *National Enquirer*, a pair of rugged black boots and a pair of dark gray jeans. Leaving the man on the side of the road in his white boxer-briefs and gray t-shirt probably wasn’t the nicest thing Merriam could have done, but she knew Harold would still have been proud of her for keeping the upper hand.

The Mystic Night

Amber Busha

*T*he cold night air nipped at my bare skin
Like an angry hound - I shivered as I imagined it
Chasing me - only my scent in its nose.
The street lights dispense an orange haze, creating
Halos around themselves
That reflect off the black pools in the streets.
The splash startles me as I step into one, the freezing
Water an unwelcome sensation to my
Tingling toes. The night smells of the heavy
Fog rolling in from the river.
I turn a corner and hear the gentle slap slap
Of the Thames against the bank and
I wonder, "How many times has William Shakespeare
Walked these streets at this hour? I think of Eliot,
He must have written once on a night like this;
You know the fog does tend to lick its tongue
Into the corners of the evening...
Three figures are huddled outside on the only open
store -
One passes a brown paper bag to another -

He shakes his head and the first slurs,
“Oy—it ain’t peer pressure, it’s just your turn lad.”
I smile as I hear the familiar slosh of a half empty
bottle
Turned up. “Lucky guy” I think to myself –
He’s too fubar-ed to even feel the damp cold.
Shu bu jin yan yan bu jin yi
The profound words of knowledge and a deeper
sense
Of meaning, as simple as Trig I guess.
I dove into the river and swam to Picadilly Circus
To see what was there.
I passed Big Ben on the way and he winked at me.
“I suppose “The Waterboy”
Is a fitting name,” I told him and grinned.
This night will be one to remember
The night London came alive –
The goofy clock, the laughing pubs,
The history lesson from The Victoria and Albert,
And The Globe is always overdramatic
At this time of night.
Don’t go near Westminster or
The Tower of London now –
All you’ll hear is droning hymms

And the chopping of heads.
They all stopped their mystic chatter
And sang to me, "We were born before the wind,
Also younger than the sun,"
I smiled with sorrow at the thought
Of a life measured out in coffee
Spoons as I asked myself,
"Do I dare?"



6 a.m./I-10

Matt Mallard

6 hours on the road with
6 more to go.
The drive
stretches forever
as if the road might crumble
into the sea,
the January salt-waves
lapping up the pavement
as it sinks into the sand.
The sun finally decides
to start its day,
at first,
only as a sliver
of electric blue between
navy clouds, a thin slice
of the sky revealed by
God
and a giant silver letter opener.

As our two best friends
snooze in the back seat,
she attempts to keep me awake
when our song plays.

*There now, steady love,
So few come and won't go.
Will you, won't you
be the one I'll always know?
When I'm losing my control,
the city spins around.*

*You're the only one who knows.
You slow it down.*

“Do you still think of me
when you hear this song?”
Stealing a sideways glance,
I say, “I always did.”

We both turn our heads
toward the road
as the sun breaks through
the bottom of the clouds.
The road descends, and at the end,
between the row of Southern pines
that line both sides of the interstate,
the sky glows
pale gold and coral,
pigments Raphael used
to paint his heavenly cherubs.
We stare at the morning,
admiring the beauty of the sunrise
(and Isaac's song),
refusing to dare utter a syllable
until he's finished his oath.

*Oh, oh, be my baby.
I'll look after you.*

I neglect the urge
to reach for her hand,
almost laughing,
remembering
the reason we broke
up in October.

I saw a man today,
Cast as a dark shadow
Against the charcoal waters
And ashen sky.
His denim work pants crinkled
At the hips as he bent
To scoop a handful of rocks
From the pebbly shore along the choppy river.
Moving his hand from side to side,
He let the rocks bounce and rattle
Like enclosed dice in a game of chance.
Then, he threw one rock
Across the water
And watched it skip, deliberate.
Satisfied, he looked at the rocks
In his hand.
I watched as his beautiful black brow
Furrowed deeply with concentration.
His weathered hands
Felt to find the next one,
And I wondered:
Did he judge them
By color?

3.8.2009

Lear stared at himself in the mirror, make-up lights ringing his form, providing beautiful, yellow lighting, as he slowly remembered his name was Howard Stills. Rehearsals had been going very well, and the entire cast was still abuzz in the hallways outside his dressing room, whispering and shouting their excitement. All of it, of course, was focused at some level on Howard and his performance in the play. Advanced reviews were already glowing, and the rumors surrounding the production were that this was the seminal work of Howard Stills' career. Sitting alone, Howard wondered again if he was losing his sanity.

Acting had always been natural to Howard Stills, even as a child. He performed to great acclaim in his grade school classes, giving his encore in the principal's office. Everyone secretly appreciated his abilities, even the teachers that yelled for quiet and resented the loss of attention to the child. His personality was magnetic, and led naturally to a very popular social life as he progressed through school. The drama department sought him out early as he entered high school, as did the young actresses. They all seemed in awe of how easily he embodied any role, and happily sought to claim whatever piece of that talent they could.

His charm also brought intimate knowledge of

those girls thought unattainable by the student body, either head cheerleaders or quarterback's girlfriends. The first was Tammy Abernathy. She was blonde, a cheerleader, and utterly out of his league by all accounts. Howard saw her at her locker one day and recalled her linebacker boyfriend grabbing his head and shoving it in the used towel bin in gym earlier that week, calling him a drama fag as his friends egged him on.

Howard came up quietly, watching Tammy for a moment, before clearing his throat slightly and saying hello. Her curls bounced as her head whipped around, and he saw surprise and an automatic disgust on her face. Being from a lower social run, it was obviously unheard of for someone like Howard to engage someone like Tammy in conversation. He pressed on, unimpressed, "How are you?"

"What do you want?" She asked, already turning back to her locker. Howard watched her shuffling some papers together, looking for something, and noticed something new. When her boyfriend Jerry had given her his State Champion ring, Tammy had been so proud she'd crowed to the other cheerleaders, loud enough for the entire cafeteria to hear, for nearly a week. Her finger was bare now, and looking back to her face, her eyes seemed slightly red and swollen.

"Just saying hi. Where's your ring?" he asked. Tammy's head whipped around, and she looked ready to say something nasty, probably that it wasn't his business. It seemed to catch in her throat, though, and after a moment she turned back to her

locker, silent. Howard leaned closer, catching the scent of strawberry shampoo and prescription acne medication. In a voice full of quiet concern, said, "Do you want to talk about it?"

By college, Howard had all the certainty in the world that the course of his life was set. He was an actor, bound for Hollywood or Broadway, whichever he might fancy, and nothing could stand in his way. Here, though, he was tested for the first time. The concept of an acting technique had never occurred to him. Roles came as easily as breath, and he never needed to try, or go through the exercises his teachers now forced. History and criticism also seemed beyond him, and he quite vocally resented having to learn what he considered so unnecessary to being on stage.

Parts were not offered so readily to Howard here, either. Seniors held tight sway over the department, and many were offended by Howard's certainty of being cast, and even more so that this was backed with a natural talent so few ever received. Rumors cropped up and insults were traded behind his back, but the high school social scene had prepared him well for the drama of a theater department. Soon, Howard had his own small followers of hangers-on and devotees. He himself had become a follower of Marlon Brando and his pioneering technique of method acting. By his third year, he was playing Mercutio and Hamlet, and had the world of college drama all to himself.

Some time during a fall semester production of “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead”, a talent agent quickly signed Howard on, and Stills quite happily left without a degree for the world of professional acting. This time became more of a blur of background parts and alcohol as he was thrown full force into a hectic New York City nightlife. New York was far more exciting in its sense of freedom and lack of control. Where college had been an insular community, this was an open world of theatrical possibilities and drug infused debaucheries.

His agent approached him after a particularly interesting “Love’s Labour’s Lost”. He had gotten to know Rosaline and Katherine quite well in a single night, and the two girls were delighted to introduce him to the world of cocaine. The last show he missed his entrance, as he had been doing lines in the girls’ dressing room as they cheered him on. Only a few days later Howard had gotten a call to come into the offices of Green Talent Agency to speak to Saul Green personally.

“Kid,” Saul began, one hand indicating a large leather chair for Howard to sit in as the other gently tapped ash from an expensive cigar. “I like you, kid. The director’s like you, the audience likes you, but you got to cut this shit out now.”

Howard looked confused for a moment and started to speak before Saul’s hand came up to indicate he was far from finished. He liked the man, but Howard was well aware that when his agent got on a tear, it would sometimes take hours and a very expensive

scotch to shut him up. After a long drag on his cigar, Saul started in again, "I know you're going to say 'what shit?' and sit there looking oblivious to the entire dame world. But you know what I'm talking about. You almost blew that last show."

For the first time, Howard became indignant. He felt heat crawling up his neck, and wondered how much was from anger or from shame. Howard might not have been the best person in the world, but he had always prided himself on being a consummate professional. No matter how much he had to drink the night before or how badly an enraged boyfriend had taken it out on his face, Howard Stills was always on that stage and saying his lines when he was supposed to be.

"The producer was on the phone bitching me out before the curtain even went down," Saul said leaning back in his chair, hands resting on his large stomach as he regarded Howard through the haze of smoke. "I told him he was lucky he got half the addicts in that show on stage at all. It was a closing matinee, one last chance for all the blue-haired ladies and punk high school kids looking for extra credit. But that's not the problem here, Howard."

Howard slumped slightly in his seat, knowing full well what the problem was. He had to admit, the last couple months had been a storm of exciting experiences and almost frightening new pleasures. The director had yelled at him and the two actresses for an hour after closing, but none of them had been sober enough to care. They were still coming down a long time later, and Howard's first sharp memory had

been waking up in his apartment in a cold sweat, with two people who were almost strangers in his bed. To someone with a greater level of insight, it might have been a wakeup call, but Howard had just felt sick.

“I ain’t going to tell you to stop with the stuff,” Saul was saying. “Would be hypocritical. Hell, I do it myself. But you aren’t fucking up another gig, hear me? You’re young, and people may like you, but I can’t get work for an actor that isn’t on stage.”

Howard left Saul’s office that day feeling more confused than ever. He had expected some sort of moral boundaries to be set up, for an older, wiser person to show him the right way of doing things. Now, though, it seemed like no one cared and those boundaries just didn’t exist. After that, though, Howard never missed a cue and kept extracurricular activities till after show time. It first registered that more than a decade had passed when he was no longer being cast as Claudio or Romeo. He saw younger actors getting the parts, despite their obvious inferiority, and Howard felt mortality for the first time.

This first piece of introspection gave birth to what many hailed as the Hamlet of that generation, and a new crop of awards and young girls buried the depression and self-awareness the actor had been so close to falling into. His love of casual drug use had been left behind with a younger, healthier heart and a nose that didn’t have a tendency to bleed when anything stronger than air passed through it. It was around this time Howard discovered a new love of alcohol, though. Drinking seemed second nature to

any seasoned actor, and the great Howard Stills never had a shortage of company to celebrate with.

“Come on, do it again for us,” the girl asked. He hadn’t bothered learning her name, but Howard knew she must be about half his age. Probably an NYU student, trolling the bars and gathering around any name on Broadway with the slightest fame attached to it. This girl, with her gaggle of friends had been bothering him to do lines from his Hamlet over and over the entire night. He didn’t mind too much, as she kept repaying him with views of her cleavage, young, smooth skin held tight in a designer blouse.

“All right, but this is the last time,” Howard smiled, and the girl felt it down her spine. They were both using the other, he thought. Both were just cheap thrills, one an attractive thing a middle aged man had no business with, and the other a connection to that fabled idea of fame and praise on the stage. Another round of drinks came that he would never paid for, and Howard gave the worst Hamlet he had ever done.

Age had taken him more quickly every year, it seemed. Howard was approaching the end of a long, distinguished career and couldn’t hate it more. The critics were almost afraid of his Macbeth, saying it was filled with more rage than they were comfortable with on a stage. The audience loved his Falstaff, but the people behind the scenes were seeing the cracks starting around the edges. He was getting slower, his performances sloppier. The calls came less frequently after that, usually only for supporting roles that Howard refused on principal, despite what bills needed paying that month.

Finally, a day came when Howard realized he was now seventy years old. It was then the realization came that his life was over, and he contemplated just finishing it off with some bit of dignity. Before these thoughts had gone far beyond looking at the knives in the kitchen speculatively, the phone rang. The phone never rang anymore. Picking it up, he heard the voice of his agent, Frank Green. Saul had died ten years ago, leaving the business to his son. Frank had been trying to unload old war horses like Howard Stills ever since, seeing them as the ballast keeping the agency from making any real money.

“Howard,” Frank said. Howard could hear the fake smile on his face. “How are you, birthday boy? Listen, I’ve got a bit of a present for you. The Shakespeare Festival is casting right now. How would you like to play Lear?”

The production had been the greatest ordeal of Howard’s life. Many of the actors were young and disrespectful, thinking that theirs were the parts that really mattered in the play and vying for the director’s time. Others paid him far too much attention, acting more the sycophant than the die-hard fan. Howard had no time for either, and relied on the director to keep rehearsals from breaking into complete bedlam on occasion. For his part, Howard found his mind betraying him for the first time. Lines wandered in his head, becoming confused and sometime not coming at all. Everyone, of course, understood completely what kind of pressure he was

under and assured him it was perfectly all right and grumbling about how the old man needed to get his act together when they snuck out for the occasional cigarette.

Sitting in his dressing room, Howard found one night he couldn't quite remember his name. Surely, he was a man named Lear, who had just been on stage lamenting the deaths of his daughter and beloved Fool. He looked in the mirror a second time and saw Howard there, every inch a decrepit actor. There was no doubt anymore that this was his last show. Shaking several random medications from their bottles into his palm, he just hoped he could keep it all together. Frank Green, despite being an ass of a man and not near the agent his father had been, was right about this being an incredible part. There were good actors here, despite his anger at a few, and the director was one of the most competent he had ever met.

Tilting his head back, Howard swallowed his pills, wondering if they ever really helped. None of it mattered, after all. Mackers had it right; sound and fury, signifying nothing. This was simply the last, futile flailing of a dying creature. The audience, the directors, all of them always expected so much from him. All he ever mattered was on the stage, though. Howard Stills had never meant anything to anyone unless he was pretending to be someone else. He shook his head and knocked over a small makeup mirror in frustration. It cracked on the floor, shards spread and catching the light. No, couldn't think like that. Howard had one last performance to give, and

he'd be damned if he'd let anything get in the way of that, himself least of all.

The show opened the next night. The seats were crowded with eager season ticket holders feeling blessed to see Howard Stills on a stage, critics mulling over the old man's career and wondering if he'd pull it off, bored husbands and wives dragged there because of the "culture", and students already yawning and wishing they had taken another class. The lights dimmed and the house fell silent, waiting for Kent's immortal words to begin the show. Many would later claim with pride they had seen the last, and best, performance of Howard Stills' life. On some level, all of them realized they were seeing something special.

The audience watched an old man lose the dignity of a king, reduced to nothing but his bare humanity and somehow still clinging to himself. The critics gave praise where they felt it was absolutely necessary, not daring to admit the awe they felt that night. Students went home and wondered if Shakespeare was something more than just words and essays written unwillingly. No one was there, however, when Howard Stills went back to his dressing room that night, slowly and reverently taking off his costume, hanging it up and removing his make up. He sat in his chair, looked over the bouquets and cards of congratulations, then looked at his reflection one more time. Howard Stills remembered his name, closed his eyes, and died in his dressing room that night.

Opening Night

K. D. Bridges

*I*t was hot and humid
as we sat on dusty
crates of worn,
threadbare clothes.
We drank Jack Daniel's
out of red plastic cups,
laughing so hard
that tears welled in
our eyes. Sitting in
the dressing room,
while above us on
the stage
the show went on.
No matter what
the critics would say
about our performances,
down there in
the dark
we played our roles
perfectly.

Art

Literature



Central State

Elaine Dearing

Photography



Key
Mayu Nagoya
3D



Teapot
Warren Bailey
3D



Broken Girl

Daniel Evers

2D



Untitled

Brianna Bolden

2D

Campus Bookstore Award



Global Gothic

Daniel Evers

2D

Adam
Masaaki Sasaki
Photography



Door Knob
Alexandra Scillian
Photography





Plank Across the Water

Brandi Goddard

Photography





Untitled
Heath Stovall
Photography



Séance Fiction

Christopher Hughes

Digital Media





Cigarette
Cale Frederick
Digital Media
2nd Place



The Cloning
Jessica Grotiahn
Digital Media
1st Place



Untitled

Makiko Shimabukuro

3D

2nd Place





Mix Match

Daniel Evers

3D

1st Place



All You Need is Love

Rebecca Marshall

Photography

2nd Place



Deep Creek Canyon, CO

David Sercel

Photography

1st Place



Isn't the Weather Lovely?

Olivia Sherif

2D

2 Place

nd



Face 006

Makiko Shimabukuro

2D

1st Place



Face 008

Makiko Shimabukuro

2D

Best of Show



lights & shadows